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The Violent, Furious, and Persistent Unions:
Picher, Oklahoma during the 1930s.

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“From all directions as one approaches Picher, Oklahoma, the mountainous chat piles loom prominently in the distance, impressive testimony to the labor of thousands of miners and mill men who spent their lives extracting and milling lead and zinc ores from the Tri-State Mining District of Oklahoma, Kansas, and Missouri.”¹ The mines started to be discovered in the regions of Southeast Kansas and Northeast Oklahoma during and before the turn of the Twentieth Century. More and more people began to inhabit these regions and with more settlement through the heart of America, shifted to more exploration of the rich resources of lead, and zinc, which were plentiful throughout the region. The increase in the mining industry to the area brought many issues up for the workforce of the mining companies. This led many companies working to benefit themselves and not to think of their employee’s benefits or lives. The violent, furious, and persistent unions were very adamant during the 1930s.

The mining unions not only had an impact on miners and mining companies throughout the district; they also made a great impact on the communities and families as well. The 1930s were rough times for miners which most of them worked for around \$1.00 a day in the early 1930s. As the entire country was being overcome by the Great Depression it also put a strain on the mining industry. There may have been strains on the industry, but that did not stop unions from making an influence on the workforce to create more sustainable work environments and conditions for miners. The Unions worked very hard to make better lives for their workplace, so they could have a better life for their families and better able to provide for their growing families.²

¹ George G. Suggs, Jr. *Union Busting in the Tri-State: The Oklahoma, Kansas, and Missouri Metal Workers’ Strike of 1935*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986, 3.

² William James Cassidy, *The Tri-State Zinc-Lead Mining Region : Growth, Problems and*

Unions were no easy task to organize especially in Picher, Oklahoma. As Cassidy describes in his dissertation the people of Picher are very individualistic and unsocial in their own community. He calls them “hill people”³ and says they have absolutely no social skills or ideals whatsoever. They keep to themselves and the idea of trying to organize these miners will be quite a task indeed for any union to handle. Some unions had try to organize in early days of Picher mining, but very unsuccessful and short-lived in the area. The 1930s had been a specific time for outbursts of unions forming in and around Picher. The longest period a union ever stayed active was about six years, where most only made a couple of years being active. The long and tiresome struggles of union formation although brought relief to the mining workforce and forever changed the mining industry of Picher, Oklahoma.

In the early days of mining, the Tri-State District was started with private proprietors engaging in mining once the magnitude of the resources where starting to be discovered this led to large mining companies to encompass the area and force the small operating proprietors out of the business and form larger companies in their place. Miners started to work for these companies who ran their own small mining operations before, but also led to more and more workers moving into the area. This helped boost the economy in a major way as if producing thousands and eventually leading to millions of dollars’ worth of rich mining ore to be produced from the region. The large quantities of miners working in the district who had been bossed around by these large company mining operators brought on the formation of many mining unions widespread throughout the district.

Prospects, (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, PA, 1955), 265-67.

³ *Ibid.*

The mining unions that formed in the Tri-State District were short-lived for the most part with the exceptions of a few unions that did stick around for longer periods of time. The organization and purpose of unions in the district is of the most extreme importance for miners. A union fought for the miners rights as workers of the district and to give them more benefits and privileges in their work environment and conditions. Organizations have their own purpose or mission behind their formation and Cassidy refers to the description of the association. J.C. Heilman, local mining engineer, in 1931 provided a breakdown of the purposes behind organizing in the Tri-State District:

- I. To promote the interests of its members by ethical and lawful means.
- II. To collect, compile, and record available data and statistics touching or concerning the production or consumption of zinc and lead ores.
- III. To cooperate with the authorities of the government in the administration of the laws affecting directly or indirectly the zinc and lead mining industry of the Tri-State District . . . wherever and whenever such cooperation is desired or requested.⁴

The Organizations followed through behind their purposes of organization by compiling and publishing statistics and available data to their publics in the area of the Tri-State District on basis of weekly, monthly, and annually. They also organized monthly meetings for the metallurgists and mill men to discuss accidents and issues throughout the mines where reports and data are later published from issues brought up during these meetings. They also maintain their welfare department staffed by a director and two full time nurses who dedicate their work to the issues of those who work within the district.

Many miners experienced a violent ride in the workforce including many threats and abuse from companies or associates of companies. Some companies went ahead and just discharged anyone for having joined a union or if there was rumor of someone going to join a

⁴ *Ibid*, 259.

union they had been threatened with discharge from the company. It was quite a battle for the miners, but once 1935 arrived they decided they had enough and during this year membership in the unions was on the rise. A strike broke out during May and June of 1935 and lasted for a few weeks. The strike temporarily shut down the district completely for three weeks due to no production at all. A union would come in to play and bring forth violence to miners to break the strike. This union was called the Blue Card Union and consisted of gangsters and thugs who were hired by mine operators to destroy the organization of any unions or strikes in Picher. State militias were called in to deal with outbreaks of the Blue Card Union terrorizing union members and state investigators pinned all the blame on the Blue Card Union.⁵

The case of corruption and violence in the workforce at Picher and other areas went to the Supreme Court after the implementation of the National Labor Relations Act in July 1935. The complaint being brought forth the Courts was companies had been violating the National Labor Relations Act and conducting unsafe, unfair labor practices in the workplace. It was a long and hard battle for about ten years to bring to the wrongfully neglected miners. The results of the Supreme Court decision brought an end to the organization of the Blue Card Union. Around the early 1940s unions were starting to reorganize again after the debates from the Supreme Court.⁶

On midnight of the 8th of May 1935 a strike was called in the Tri-State District that changed the operations of the district forever. There was a mass group of strikers that gathered at the gates to the Central Mill of the Eagle-Picher Mining and Smelting Company near Cardin. Strikers broke out in unlawful assembly all across the district. Many of the strikers are referred to as being mobs throughout the striking period for their forceful behaviors and actions towards

⁵ Cassidy,.

⁶ Lyons et al. v. Eagle-Picher Lead Co et al., 90 F.2d 321, (10th Cir. 1937)

anyone who tried to go to work in the district. They were just looking for the event or brave soul to step to try to go back to work. If anyone tried to go back to work they would beat them up or cause serious harm to the miners. There were even mob members who assembled out on the highway outside of Picher to not let anyone enter or leave the city.

The residents of Picher and of Ottawa County were furious and outraged for the lack of enforcement by their Sheriff Dry who would not try to disband the formation of these mob groups especially around the Picher mines. Sherriff Dry had been beaten up by the mob at the front of the Connell Hotel on May 27 and this forever changed the way he viewed the vicious cycle of strikers corrupting the district. “This brought the abrupt end to his willy nilly enforcement of the law”⁷ After this incident, he finally was able to gain the respect of the law-abiding citizens of the county. Once this event unraveled the mobbers began throw rocks and shoot at innocent vehicles driving by on Highway 66 near Picher. Some of the acts were witnessed by Deputy Sheriffs, but they saw firsthand of what happened to Sheriff Dry and were intimidated to act upon these out of control mobs. The National Guard was called and once these mobs heard of their arrival back in Picher there was a cease to the cruel and outrageous acts.⁸

Many companies had their own strategies to handling situations that arose with workers striking for more benefits or privileges. The following quote is based around the incidents pulled from companies who wanted to get their employees back to work, because without production they were not making any money at all. The measures taken by companies would just make

⁷ James Wardleigh, “The Strike of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers of the Tri-State District”, Columbus, KS: Southeast Kansas Vo-Tech, 1935, The Picher, OK Collection, PSU Archives, Pittsburg, KS, 10.

⁸ James Wardleigh, “The Strike of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers of the Tri-State District”, Columbus, KS: Southeast Kansas Vo-Tech, 1935, The Picher, OK Collection, PSU Archives, Pittsburg, KS., 5-12.

strikers even furious and outraged and what they would do to employees for not wanting to go to work. "Our population up there [Ottawa County] is less than 1 percent foreign. We feel like we can take care of any situation that may arise. Of course, some of the fellows got a little too much to drink last Sunday and did some things that perhaps ought not to have been done. They just prevented the opposition from meeting. It was the same tactic the C.I.O Union tried to pull on the local boys two years ago during the strike. We just turned the tables."⁹ This proves that there were vicious and cruel acts occurring all around Picher and the area just force any notion of organization of miners, so there would no strain or affect on the pocketbooks of mining operators.

A great example of seeing the Persistent part of the unions in the district was their ability to go the extra mile and see that their voices were being heard. There was a convention held out west during the mid-1930s. Many people were barely making and trying make ends meet with what they could, but it truly wasn't much. The Picher Local 15 Union sent a representative to this convention to try and see what relief or assistance could possibly be available to the families living in Picher who were struggling due to the strike. The representative tried explaining the situation in detail to the convention delegates of the struggle and starvation with the lack of resources in Picher. He worked very hard on the money that was rounded up for him to make the trip and hopefully they would see that difficulty and struggle that has affected the once thriving town.¹⁰

⁹ Suggs. 172. Suggs quoted from unidentified clipping, no date, in R.M McClintock Collection, Division of Archives Department of Libraries, Oklahoma; refer also to *Galena (Kansas) Times Republican*, April 16, 1937.

¹⁰ Suggs.

The persistent acts of any organization of operators brought along with it chaos and destruction to anyone for any reason of supporting mine workers organization. Anyone who showed they where or supported mine workers organization ended up with vandalized homes, businesses destroyed, and threats on their families. Many businesses had been destroyed by showing their union cards in store front windows shortly after they placed their cards in windows their businesses where blown up by dynamite. There was however not just corruption, abuse, and persistency on the side of the operators stand of the strike. Miners picketed outside the mines and if any worker attempted to go back to work. They were beaten up by the picketers for the thought of just attempting to work for the company as awful as the operators were treating them. There is law for miners that any miner has the right to picket, but does not have the right insult or abuse an honest worker for serving their responsibilities.

All issues that are generally in alignment of interest between the miners and operators, excluding the issue of union organization, which this is a topic of discussion that never had any sort of interest or agreement among miners and operators. "Mills concluded that the mining industry 'absolutely' determined the life of the district, relegating agriculture and manufacturing into a strictly secondary position."¹¹ As this quote describes mining was the life blood of the area and many people came to the area and became involved with the mining industry over time, which led to issues of organizations among the workers. This industry is what strengthened the community and the economy of Picher into a strong vital city of the Tri-State District. Mining was the reason for so many smaller towns and communities to spring up near Picher. The expansion of productions and exploration of new rich resources caused the abundance of employees into mining company's production.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 5.

The Eagle-Picher contract was developed to better serve the employed miners of their company. It was agreed upon that they provide affordable safeguards for health and safety to their employees. All properties of Eagle-Picher needed to be inspected and corrections to any working conditions needed to be corrected by the Safety Department as it was their full responsibility to see safety was a top priority for their business. Employees have their right to report any unsafe working conditions and dangerous situations they experience to be properly investigated and resolved in a timely and safe manner by the Safety Department of Eagle-Picher.¹² “Aside from the right to refuse to work until an inspection has been made, there was not much extra protection in this clause. The inspection, it will be noted, was unilateral. Although Eagle-Picher’s Safety Department has always been excellent, this clause deprived the Union of the right to see that it remained good.”¹³ This quote from Cassidy’s dissertation explains how company owners believed they were doing what they thought was right and personally just have people quit nagging at them for not following through with doing their jobs correctly. The unions felt like they were being left out and really did not have so much of a voice in a situation like the clause from Eagle-Picher.

The strike had ended around July 1935 and mills started on production once again. The workers were finally receiving some benefit to their work day and having the ability of safer work standards for their mines. There were approximately 44 mills with 4,200 workers when the strike began after the mass chaos of the strike in July there 50 mills with around 4,000 workers on production. Mine workers were able to have better wages, safer conditions, and better work days. Safer conditions does not mean it was totally safe for miners, but just the fact that if they

¹² Cassidy, 279.

¹³ *Ibid.*

felt unsafe working down there. They did not have to until the situation was completely checked out and cleared for them to continue work on the mine.

The opening words Suggs uses in his book, which truly sums up very effectively about the history and economy of Picher in its booming days. Picher may not be much of sight today with the tornado of 2008, Superfund Site buyouts, closing of its schools in 2009, and deterioration over the past few decades, which have left it as a ghost town. It is hard to imagine a place that was once home to thousands of people is a replica ghost town today. The many people who called Picher home for some many years had to move away due to the lead and zinc contamination from the many decades of mining that have affected the surface soil and water. As the beginning quote discuss the enormous piles of chat standing to see miles away. There would not be those piles of chat if was not for the mining workforce of Picher, that brought the district to life and the mining unions that kept them alive.

The mining unions were very violent, furious, and persistent during the 1930s, but they forever made a tremendous impact on the industry. There violence seen through mining operators and the mine workers as not much was agreed upon between them for so many years. It was basically a string of violence for the area. Once one group acted out many others followed in their footsteps. It was no exception if it was miners, operators, or even law enforcement. Many of the miners became very furious under the conditions of the mine industry leading into the Great Depression. They were tired of the acts of disrespect and unjust conditions within the mines and was about time for some change to happen. As the unions were very persistent in their acts work more efficient and suitable work regulations and conditions. It took the unions many years and many struggles throughout Picher and the Tri-State District, but for all their efforts it was well worth it in the end. The organization of this small community was a long vigorous battle, but the

rewards of the battle ever changed the economy and community of this small town in Northeastern Oklahoma. A once thriving town has been torn away with the destruction and contamination, but there is great testimony to the history of the mining industry and the unions that worked so hard to organize this area and community to make a better life for its residents.

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